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A DAY ON MOUNT ERYX¹

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It was on a sunny June morning that I took the western Sicily train at Palermo for Trapani. Thirty years ago Ferdinand Gregorovius, historian of Rome in the Middle Ages, made the same trip and expressed intense indignation at the "furious haste" with which he was rushed through the splendid and legend-laden scenery between the two points. Anyone who has had much experience in railway travel will smile at the application of the word "haste" to a train on the western Sicily railroad; and yet it is a pity to go through such a region, filled with present beauties and memories of so many and so varied pasts, at any rate of speed faster than a slow walk broken by long pauses for enjoyment and reflection.

It was well past noon when we reached Marsala, Lilybaeum of old, where Romans and Carthaginians fought in the Punic Wars, and where Garibaldi effected his landing and began his brilliant campaign in 1860. The great wine establishments of the Ingham-Whitaker Company, Florio, and Woodhouse are its distinctive features today. From Marsala up the coast to Trapani one's eye is caught by countless evaporating basins of more than forty salt-making establishments, with many windmills, used both for pumping the sea-water into the basins and for pulverizing the hardened salt. I was alone and was approaching Trapani with no prearranged program to hamper my movements, a way of traveling which will doubtless seem to many desultory and ineffectual, but which one summer's experience proved to me to have many and great advantages—perhaps enough to excuse even its apparent selfishness. It was hot, windy, and dusty along the shore as we neared Trapani, and a glance out of the window on the right side at once determined my immediate course. Above the dust and heat,

¹ Read at the thirteenth annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South.

neatly outlined against the sky, stood ancient Eryx, the Monte San Giuliano of today. Gregorovius thought it "the very ideal of a mountain, the masterpiece of Nature in mountain formation," rising majestically out of the plain, as Maritimo, ancient Hiera, loftiest of the Aegatian Islands, rises out of the brine a few miles to the west. Trapani has its objects of interest, but with that dustless mountain top in sight there was no thinkable alternative for me. As soon as the train pulled into the station, with the irreducible minimum for the night in a handbag, I started on foot for the summit. Determined to find my way without asking anybody, I ran into two or three blind alleys before I finally got started up the slope by jumping a stone wall or two and crossing private lots, fortunately without encountering dog, policeman, or irate owner to object. Once while strolling in the lower Palisade region of the Hudson I encountered a sign which read "no trespassing a-l-o-u-d." I have followed the suggestion ever since, and can recommend trespassing in silence as decidedly the more fruitful of the two methods. But to return to Eryx, the bare stretches of the mountain side which I had now reached were threaded by paths here and there, leading apparently by lines of least resistance to the goal which I wished to reach. But why should a man on foot and alone follow a beaten path in such a place as this? I made my own route, as nearly a straight line for the summit as was compatible with my desire to keep an open view of the sea and the Aegatian Islands. This did not take me past the church of the Madonna dell'Annunziata, the chief tourist attraction of Trapani according to the guide books, and I also passed too far to one side to cross the Piano dei Cappuccini, of which I had fine views, however, from different points above. In spite of the dry, hard, and stony character of the ground, dandelions, thistles, and other wild flowers lifted their bright blossoms into sight here and there, drawing from the Mediterranean breezes the bit of moisture necessary to keep life in their diminutive forms.

At one point, as I sprang upon a detached mass of limestone to get a better view, I heard a rustle in the dry weeds at one side, and first one, then another, and again a third, rabbit or hare (I am no zoölogist), scurried away to a more distant hiding-place, calling

my mind back to the "cotton-tails" of my boyhood days on the brier-clad hillsides of the Ohio Valley. Old Eryx has seen many a change in the dress, speech, and habits of the men and women who have climbed its slopes as the centuries have gone by, but the ancestors of these three timid little *conigli*, not different from them in any noticeable detail of appearance or habit, doubtless sat among the rocks and weeds on these very slopes and saw the Roman and Carthaginian galleys in deadly struggle more than twenty-one centuries ago, or ran and hid as Hamilcar's surrendered troops marched down to take passage back to Carthage, belittled by the trifling ransom which victorious Rome had thought it worth while to demand for their release. *Egli ha un core di coniglio*, "he has the heart of a rabbit," the Italian will say of one whom he holds in supreme contempt; but while one set of inhabitants after another have gained Mount Eryx only to lose it again, the timid little *conigli* have held their ground. It is the meek that inherit the earth after all. To the traveler whose mind is not too exclusively given to such objects as are catalogued in the guide books, these little things that by their comparatively unvarying identity connect the most distant times and places come with a peculiar welcome. I felt it when these little rabbits jumped up at my side. I felt it again when I caught the familiar scent of wild elder blossoms before I had seen the bushes on the slopes above Frascati. I felt it when I picked the little wild strawberries on the sides of Pilatus, or the huckleberries on the mountains overlooking Bellagio, or when I sat under the shadow of a great rock along the winding road which leads up from Palermo to the shrine of Santa Rosalia and watched the black ants carrying their plunder to their holes by their characteristically devious paths.

But I am straying too far from Eryx. The elevation of the mountain above the sea is about 2,500 feet, and the distance to its summit by the route I took was possibly not over three miles, so that I could afford to go slowly. The sun was getting well into the west, and stray clouds flecked with shadows a sea surface stirred by a moderately brisk wind from the southwest, the Africus of the Roman poets. The Aegatian Islands stood out clearly to the view, Maritimo, farthest of the three, towering almost as high as

Eryx itself, Levanzo almost in line with it in the nearer distance, and Favignana to the left. In a Naples picture-shop, two weeks later, I found that one of Brogi's photographers had caught just the view that I had witnessed, a triumph of sea and sky photography, and the copy which I brought home with me is one of the most effective memory stimulants of the entire trip.

While clambering over a mass of broken rock which hid the summit from me, I caught suddenly a faint whisper of bells, as if coming through the rock itself from some elfin cathedral in the mountain's heart. A few steps higher the sound grew louder and less vague, and again a few steps and it rang out full and clear as the campanile of the little cathedral at the summit came into sight. I do not know whether these bells have any fame, but I do know that they sounded peculiarly sweet to me that afternoon, and that I would willingly walk up the mountain side again if for no other reason than to hear them once more under the same conditions. After sitting down on the rock and writing a letter, I went on into the town. Tourists do not usually enter that way, and so I had the good fortune to wander over a good part of the quaint old town before anybody noticed that I was a tourist. Possibly still another advantage of traveling alone, for an impecunious school teacher of the male sex, is the tendency to drift into a condition of clothing not at all suggestive of the American millionaire and not declaring loudly your tourist classification. At any rate I escaped detection for the better part of an hour and was finally spotted by a bright boy only when I had reached the point where I could conveniently make use of his comparatively inexpensive services. For his credentials as guide he proudly produced a letter from a lady near Boston, to whom he had shown the sights of the town a year before. I have already said something of the view to the westward, over the Mediterranean and the Aegatian Islands. Southward, along the shore as far as to Marsala, stretched hundreds of acres of salt basins, which I had seen a few at a time from the windows of the train. Inland, the ripening wheat gave the prevailing color tone to the broad reaches of level plain or moderately elevated hills that characterize the western end of the island, south of the group of mountains of which Eryx is historically

the most distinguished member. The yellow of the wheat, however, was pleasantly broken by the rich green of many vineyards, loaded with grapes which were later to fill the wine cellars and swell the bank account of Signore Florio, who might seem to be usurping the functions of Bacchus in the thoughts of the modern Italian farmer.

As one turns from the south toward the east, the surface rises again, rapidly and more rapidly, until the eye finally catches the majestic summit of Sparagio, only about ten miles away, looming up into the evening sunlight 1,200 feet higher than the top of Eryx. The peak is not known to fame and I have met no one who has ascended it. The classically educated traveler ordinarily considers himself bound to see the theater and temple of Segesta, the ruins at Selinunte, Trapani, and the antiquities of Eryx, and then hurries eastward again, while the professional mountain climber scorns anything in Sicily short of Aetna itself. Still there is something to be said for mountain climbing in little, and the one certain addition to the itinerary of my second visit to Sicily, if Fortuna Pauperum has a second in store for me, is a climb to the top of Sparagio, which cannot fail to give an unparalleled view of all western Sicily, with Aetna, the Calabrian Mountains, smoky Stromboli, the Lipari Islands, Ustica, Pantellaria, and the nearest points of the African coast all within the possible range of view, if one should have the not wholly impossible favor of an absolutely clear atmosphere.

The crooked streets of the gray old town, with the distant views of which I have spoken, took up my time until the stomach began to call imperiously for its evening allowance. A man alone can afford to take chances, and I staked mine on an inconspicuous sign reading "Albergo di Sicilia." Just where the building began and ended, in the labyrinth of weathered and rudely laid old stone walls, one could hardly tell. I dismissed my boy, with orders to report again at eight o'clock in the morning, and entered the door. A passageway led me to an open court, where two women, apparently mother and daughter, were completing the family washing by an old fig tree. One of them showed me to a room on the second floor, in which bedstead, chair, table, window fastenings, door latch, hinges, everything in fact but the toilet appliances was hand made. The window opened toward the east, with a view down

into the valley directly in front, Sparagio farther on, and a fine outlook over the sea, off toward Capo San Vito to the northeast. It was thus ordained that I must waken in time for the sunrise. I was soon called to the dining-room, where I found eggs, fruit, very hard-baked rolls, goat's milk, and coffee, with a young Frenchman as my only table companion, not inclined to be talkative where one side of the conversational exchange must perforce be either stumbling French or halting English. The evening I spent partly wandering about the streets, partly sitting on a stone bench in the modest little Giardino Municipale, gazing at the faint glimmer of the sea, or the black mass of Sparagio against the starlit sky, or letting my mind wander from one to another of the legends of the past connected with this gray old mountain.

But I must hasten on. The sky divinity furnished a faultless sunrise which I deeply enjoyed but cannot stop to describe, even if I had the mastery of color vocabulary necessary to do it justice. I made my visit to the ruins on the site of the ancient temple early in the morning, intentionally before the arrival of my young guide. A woman gnarled with age and toil let me into the inclosure. Her husband was lying apparently desperately ill in a little room to one side of the entrance, and she took the money I offered and let me go on to explore the ruins alone. Of the original temple nothing remains except a little of the substructure and a large cistern cut in the rock, which now goes by the name of "the well of Venus." Some have taken it to be the treasure chamber of the temple, but in the absence of any other receptacle for the purpose it seems safe to conclude that it was simply a storage cistern for water. The broken walls now inclosing the rocky pinnacle upon which the original temple stood are of far later structure. Here Astarte, Aphrodite, and Venus were worshiped in succession by Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, with rites shocking enough to modern ideas of social and religious propriety, but perhaps no more in conflict with the moral possibilities of the age than some of the characteristic features of the various civilizations of today.

After leaving the ruins of the temple I went with my boy guide around the old defensive wall of the town. In its lower courses the masonry of the Phoenicians is easily identified, and some of the large, irregular blocks of stone bear Phoenician letters which are

possibly the initials of the individual stonecutters. In the middle of the forenoon, as I stood on this wall and looked down upon the sea toward the north, I was attracted by an isolated stretch of sandy beach, possibly two miles around the shore from Trapani. Out to sea the waves were foaming over a little reef which suggested the turning-point in the boat race described in the *Aeneid*. I was seized with a desire to make my way directly down to that beach, throw off my clothes, and take a plunge into the blue Mediterranean in the old-fashioned way of my Ohio River boyhood. Again, let me say, a man traveling all alone has some undeniable advantages. I asked little Giulio, my guide, whether I could get down over the side of the mountain in that direction, and his answer was favorable. I gave him a couple of lire for his services; he swung his cap and shouted, "Viva l'America," and I started, not even a goat path to guide me—nothing but a determination to find that beach and the water by the shortest feasible route. Stone fences I climbed over and hedges I found a hole through. I crossed several wheat fields, scarcely a yard of the ground without one or more poppy plants, in bright blossom, a little lower than the ripening heads of grain. Halfway down, on a level stretch of ground, I came to a stone house which looked as if it had several centuries of service to its credit. A rude stone wall surrounded the house and garden. I passed through the gate and found two women at work, who showed me their little vineyard at the rear, their olive trees, garden vegetables, and chickens, but my variety of Italian did not seem very intelligible to them or theirs to me.

From this point down I followed closely the dry bed of a ravine, gradually becoming a gorge, cut through the rock with steep and lofty sides. At last I came to an almost perpendicular drop of perhaps twenty feet. I stood and pondered for awhile. *Facilis descensus, sed retro!* I could slide over with no very great danger of a broken leg, but it would be impossible to climb back the same way, and I did not know what was farther down. But I was hot and tired, and loth to go back a half-mile or so to get out of the gorge and find a way around. So I dropped my handbag over, made the slide successfully, and a few minutes later found cow tracks in the bottom of the ravine, which relieved me of all anxiety. I could surely get out of any place that a cow could get into. I was soon at the

bottom, around a spur of the cliff to the east of the beach for which I was aiming. At the end of a concrete building near by a withered old woman was working over a washtub. I could not make her understand that I was parched with thirst, but she took me around to the front of the house, opened a door into an inner court, and motioned me to a door at the opposite side of this court, upon which I knocked. A middle-aged man in Franciscan robe came to the door and I told him my want in the best Italian at my command. He had no fresh water at hand, but brought out a flask of red wine, which is surely a mocker as an allayer of genuine thirst, as well as in other relations. I took a few sips, however, to get at least a momentary relief from the prickling dryness of my mouth and throat, and went on around the bend of the cliff. I was soon upon my sandy beach, but it was now swept by an offshore wind so strong that I was afraid to leave my clothes upon the sand for fear that they might take the air route for Naples ahead of my scheduled time for departure, and I be left, in the words of Livy, *nudus ad ictus insequentes*. The nearest shelter consisted of several diminutive sand dunes, two or three hundred feet back from the water. After careful inspection, to see that there was no wily Sicilian lurking close enough to beat me to my clothes and carry them off, or to rifle the pockets, in which my hope of getting back to America was contained, I appropriated the leaward side of one of the dunes as an apodyterium, ran across the sand with its wind-driven particles stinging me at every step, and had my first plunge into the Mediterranean. It was well worth the trouble, even including in that trouble the two-mile walk to Trapani which followed, facing a violent, lime-laden southwest wind all the way, with the midday sun beating in full force down upon me. At last I reached the railway station, too late to hunt a "ristorante" and relieve my now ravenous hunger, and a little later took my final view of old Eryx from the car window. It had not been the Trapani-Eryx trip outlined by Baedeker, not that which the readers of this sketch might choose for themselves, certainly not that which the feminine majority of them would find it possible to take even if it did suit their choice; but it remains one of the pleasantest memories of my vacation journey none the less.